



NRC NEWS

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**REMARKS BY
RICHARD A. MESERVE
CHAIRMAN OF THE
U.S. NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION
AT THE
BLACK HISTORY MONTH PROGRAM
10:30 A.M. MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2000
NRC AUDITORIUM**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to NRC's year 2000 observance of Black History Month. I am honored to participate in this annual observance and to join you in celebrating African-American history, culture, and traditions. With me this morning are my colleagues on the Commission -- Nils Diaz, Edward McGaffigan, and Jeffrey Merrifield. Greta Dicus is on official travel today and regrets that she is unable to be here for this event.

As Barbara Williams has already noted, the national theme for Black History Month this year is "Heritage and Horizons: The Legacy of African Americans and the Challenge of the 21st Century." It is a theme that invites us to look both forward and back in time, and in taking that journey, we are not simply viewing the past and future from an African-American perspective. We are also examining what we are as a Nation and where we are headed in the new century on which we have just embarked. The African-American and national perspectives that I have in mind are closely interwoven.

The experience of African Americans is today much better known than it was just a few decades ago, thanks in large part to the consistent focus provided by programs like this one. It is a story of a continuous, four-century struggle for freedom and equality led by many distinguished leaders from many different walks of life. It is also the story of individual triumph and tragedy, and of moving accounts of courage and persistence in rising above prejudice. Unfortunately, many of these individual accounts may never be fully known, either because they were never recorded or the records have been lost.

I have a personal anecdote on this point that I would like to share with you. In the early years of the Civil War, a Union Army regiment consisting of residents of western Massachusetts was ordered to attack a Confederate fort along the Texas coast. The regiment landed on the beach in anticipation of artillery support from the Navy. As often happens in war, coordination between the regiment and naval forces broke down, with the result that the entire regiment was captured. All but two members of the regiment were released on parole, which means they could return to Massachusetts if they pledged not to participate further in the war effort. All of these men were white. The other two soldiers were African-Americans who had been free men since birth. They were sold in slavery.

When I first joined my law firm as a young lawyer, an elderly partner, who had become a well-respected Civil War historian, asked if I could help find out what happened to these men. Although I conducted exhaustive record searches with the aid of the Massachusetts Historical Society and a variety of local historical organizations, town clerks, and churches in western Massachusetts, I never found any record of these two men after they were captured in Texas. I can tell you with near assurance that they never made it home and thus their ultimate fate is simply unknown. I have worried for 20 years how these men fared.

Such questions--indeed, African-American history in its entirety--have an importance much greater than simply satisfying our curiosity. Rather, we must look back in time to see where we, as a society, have been and thereby help chart the course as to where we should go. In my view, an examination of this history raises one essential question -- it raises the question of whether the principles of equality set forth in the Declaration of Independence were merely an expedient of the moment or whether instead they represent fundamental principles on which individual Americans are prepared to act.

The Nation has taken a long time --too long-- to answer this challenge. It is only in our own time that we have come close to matching in practice the spirit of the Declaration. In response to the Civil Rights Movement led by Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., and other distinguished Americans, basic political and legal rights have been achieved and a viable Black middle class has developed. These substantial achievements have been spurred in part by a series of Supreme Court decisions beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education*; by Congressional action, including passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965; and by the Executive Branch's aggressive enforcement of the law.

Nonetheless, we have much work undone. For example, we have come to recognize that legal equality is closely linked to economic equality, making the achievement of either less meaningful without parallel progress in the other. Although we have made progress in achieving legal equality, we have found that achieving progress in economic equality has and may continue to be difficult. The challenge arises in part from the normal operation of a market system. Our booming economy has served to widen the economic gulf in our population -- the already rich have gotten richer. Moreover, one of the most exciting and promising developments of the 21st century, the continuing expansion and enhancements of computer technology, may leave significant portions of our population behind unless extraordinary measures to enhance education and improve access to technology are achieved.

These and other related important issues, of course, will eventually be resolved at the national, state, and local levels through political processes. What is important for us here today and on into the new century is that we each personally pledge to bring reality to the principles of equality set forth in 1776. Each of us must be dedicated to creating a culture that is, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. phrased it,

“transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice ... where men will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character.” In addition, we need to recognize that we are partners - American cousins, if you will - in pursuit of common enterprises -- whether that enterprise is defined as protection of the public health and safety or building better neighborhoods, schools, and communities. That, in my view, is the fundamental message of the Black History Month program we are observing today.

I now take great pleasure in introducing our guest speaker, Dr. Mona Lake Jones, poet laureate of Seattle, Washington. Dr. Jones is a writer, orator, and educator who uses poetry and prose to celebrate life and living. She was one of twelve women featured in the National Distinguished Black Women's Calendar for 1995. She has published in *Essence Magazine* and has written two books of poetry entitled *The Color of Culture, I and II*.

Dr. Jones has appeared on various programs with Oprah Winfrey; Actor Danny Glover; Susan Taylor, the Editor-in-Chief of *Essence Magazine*; Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and with such political leaders as Maxine Waters, Shirley Chisholm, Myrlie Evers-Williams, and Randall Robinson. Dr. Jones also composed the lyrics for Vanessa Williams' musical recording of “Open Your Eyes, You Can Fly.”

Dr. Jones has received numerous awards, including the Blackbird Literary Award and the Langston Hughes Award. She has served as president of the Washington State Community College Black Educators, as National Vice-President of the Council of Black American Affairs, and as President of the Black Child Development Institute.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Mona Lake Jones. Thank you.